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LABOR CONDITIONS IN THE MINES OF THE PITTSBURGH DISTRICT

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The Pittsburgh District—that mighty forge in which nature's treasures are shaped to meet men's needs—is as indefinable as it is powerful. Depending upon the point of view you take, the district may be limited by the political boundaries of the City of Pittsburgh with its 600,000 people, or it may be expanded to take in two and a half million people in a score of counties under the government of three states. For the purposes of this paper, the district will be made to include the nine counties of western Pennsylvania known as Allegheny, Washington, Greene, Fayette, Westmoreland, Beaver, Mercer, Butler and Armstrong. This is the field covered by District No. 5 of the United Mine Workers of America. While the conditions to be described are typical of all the counties in the district they apply particularly to Allegheny and Washington counties in the immediate vicinity of the City of Pittsburgh.

The greatest veins of bituminous coal to be found anywhere in the world run through this tier of counties in western Pennsylvania. The deposit is estimated at ninety-two billion tons. It has been found excellent for steam, gas and coke, and is the basis of the great manufacturing industries that flourish in the valleys of the district. The coal is close to the surface in the hills that line the rivers. It is easily mined and being above the rivers it comes down to the mills and factories by the aid of gravity.

The natural facilities for coal mining have been supplemented by a series of inventions that have made the output of Pittsburgh mines appear fabulous. "Electricity applied to undercutting, transporting and hoisting the coal enables a single mine to turn out over six thousand tons a day or one million eight hundred thousand tons a year. On certain days the output has even reached seven thousand tons. In the district forty-six million tons are produced yearly, or more than the output of either Austria-Hungary or France,

and about equal to the combined production of Belgium and Russia."

Engaged in these mining operations are about eighty thousand men, and a little more than thirty thousand of them are organized under the United Mine Workers of America. The relatively small number of men in the union gives a false impression of its power. It exercises an influence greater than its numbers. The organized men are grouped solidly in the counties nearest to Pittsburgh. Here they have increased wages, reduced the hours and improved conditions of labor. All around this organized field there are non-union men, but the entire Connellsville region is unorganized, and here the greater number of non-union mine workers are concentrated. The higher wages and shorter hours in the union mines have been influential in improving conditions among the non-union miners, though the latter are a constant menace to the union. Sometimes a rise in the union scale of wages has compelled the operators in the Connellsville field to increase wages in order to prevent their men from forming a union.

Outside the neighborhood of Connellsville the union has been making steady progress. During the last five years its membership has almost doubled. In 1903 the average monthly membership was 17,591; in 1907 it was 30,587. From 1906 to 1907 there was an increase of over seven thousand, or about thirty per cent. This growth has been principally in what is known as the district proper, along the Monongahela River and its tributary, the Youghiogheny. At present the union is trying to complete the organization of the miners in the Allegheny Valley.

The nationalities of the mine workers in the Pittsburgh District are overwhelmingly Slav. During the last ten or twelve years there has been a marked falling off in the number of English-speaking men in the mines. The operators state that in most mines barely twenty-five per cent of the men can speak English, while in a large number of mines the percentage of English speakers is much smaller.

This influx of immigrants from southeastern Europe has had two important effects. First, it has prevented the mine workers' union from improving conditions in the Pittsburgh District as fast as it has improved them farther west, in Indiana, Illinois and in other districts. Every newly-arrived immigrant thinks of a job in

Pittsburgh. Here he must be taught his unionism. His ignorance of industrial conditions, and his unfamiliar tongue make him difficult to reach. The union translates its constitution and other literature into the Slavic tongues; it employs organizers who speak the different languages; and it lowers initiation fees from ten to five and two and a half dollars to attract the newcomer. When he has learned his lesson he hears of better conditions in other districts, goes west and becomes a strong union man. This process is constantly being repeated. It can be seen plainly in the mine employing 1,000 men which has to hire, according to its superintendent, 5,000 a year in order to keep up its force, while as a general rule throughout the district 2,000 men have to be hired during the year to keep 1,000 employed. The second effect of the influx of Slavs is that their lack of intelligence makes improved machinery and a perfected organization of the mining processes absolutely essential. There is a direct connection between the increasing number of unintelligent mining laborers and the use of mining machinery during the last ten or fifteen years. Which is cause and which effect is difficult to determine. In a dispute over the introduction of a new appliance for dumping the coal at the tippie, the operators contended that the scarcity of intelligent labor compelled them to adopt machinery wherever possible, and to try to find some mechanical means in connection with the dumping and handling of the coal on the surface.

While the constant immigration has kept the mine worker of the Pittsburgh District somewhat behind his brother workmen farther west, at the same time the union has so improved conditions, that the Slav in the mines is paid from fifty to ninety per cent more per hour than his countrymen working in the mills and factories of Pittsburgh, at jobs requiring the same amount of skill and strength. In many cases the same company is compelled to pay these different rates for the same class of labor. The great steel mills and glass factories of the district are all non-union. The companies which own them also own many of the coal mines of Allegheny and Washington counties. These are all union mines, and the United States Steel Corporation, Jones & Laughlin, the Pittsburgh Glass Company, as mine owners, sign agreements with the union which provide for the eight-hour day and a scale of wages almost double what they pay for the same labor in their manufacturing plants. Prof.

John R. Commons has summed up, for the "Pittsburgh Survey," a comparison of the men in the mills with those in the mines, in the following words:

"Taking everything into account—wages, hours, leisure, cost of living, conditions of work—I should say that the common labor employed by the steel companies in their mines is 50 to 90 per cent better off than the same grade of labor employed at their mills and furnaces; that the semi-skilled labor employed at piece rates is 40 to 50 per cent better off; but among the highest paid labor, the steel roller and the mine worker are about the same."

The hours, wages and rules under which coal is mined in the Pittsburgh District are fixed at biennial conventions of workmen and employers. First the operators of a competitive area covering several states meet with representatives of the union and lay down the conditions under which the men are to work within their territory. After these conventions district conferences are held to settle all local matters, and agreements which last till the next convention are signed by both parties. Agreements between miners and operators date from about fourteen to fifteen years ago. Then they were merely local contracts made with individual operators or with a few of them. The system of interstate conventions began in 1898.

By means of these agreements the union has cut down the hours of work since ten years ago about twenty-five per cent, while wages have been increased almost one hundred per cent. Ten hours was then the working day. Now it is eight. Many kinds of work, such as entry cutting, room turning, removing clay, etc., for which formerly nothing was paid, now have a regular scale. This "dead work," in a mine employing one hundred and fifty men, would add about \$1.50 per week to the wages of each of them. It means an addition of about ten per cent to a miner's pay. A company with a pay-roll of eight thousand dollars now pays eight hundred dollars for dead work, where formerly it paid nothing.

Another way in which wages have been increased is by establishing the system of check-weighing. In the Pittsburgh District the practice of having a check-weighman was established in 1898 without a strike. The Pittsburgh Coal Company, which was formed by a consolidation of smaller companies in 1901, agreed at the first convention after that to put in a check-weighman, if the men would agree to sign a contract not to sue for wages. It was com-

mon for men to claim a greater tonnage than the company allowed them. Legally the company cannot force men to make such a contract, but most of them signed.

An idea of the general movement of wages from 1898 to 1908 can be had from the following table. The complete scale for each two-year period contains nearly two hundred items, and provides a price for any kind of work that may appear. When the first agreements were made only two lines were needed to make a scale.

Scale—Thin Vein One and a Quarter Inch Screened Coal.¹

	1898-1900	1900-2	1902-4	1904-6	1906-8
Pick mining, per ton.....	\$0.66	\$0.80	\$0.90	\$0.85	\$0.90
<i>Air Machines.</i>					
Undercutting in rooms, per ton	.125	.15	.1708	.1604	.1708
Loading in rooms, per ton....	.36	.4268	.4560	.4264	.4560
<i>Electric Machines.</i>					
Undercutting in rooms, per ton	.08	.1030	.1100	.1025	.1100
Loading in rooms, per ton....	.36	.4268	.4700	.4375	.4700

Inside Day Wage Scale.

	1898-1900	1900-2	1902-4	1904-6	1906-8
Track layers	\$1.90	\$2.28	\$2.56	\$2.42	\$2.56
Track layers' helpers	1.75	2.10	2.36	2.23	2.36
Trappers ²75	1.00	1.13	1.065	1.13
Bottom cagers	1.90	2.28	2.56	2.42	2.56
Drivers	1.90	2.28	2.56	2.42	2.56
Trip riders	1.90	2.28	2.56	2.42	2.56
Water and machine haulers.....	1.90	2.28	2.56	2.42	2.56
Timbermen, when employed.....	1.90	2.28	2.56	2.42	2.56
Pipemen for compressed air plants..	1.84	2.22	2.50	2.36	2.50
All other inside labor	1.75	2.10	2.36	2.23	2.36

Day laborers around the outside of the mines get from \$1.50 to \$2.25 per day. For a number of years the miners' officials have been trying to secure a scale of wages for outside day labor, but without success.

On the basis of the union scale the employees of the National Mining Company were able to earn during 1907 an average of \$2.90 to \$3.00 per day. They worked about 225 days out of the year. That was an exceptionally prosperous year, however. Ordinarily the number of working days runs from about 160 to 200.

¹Thin vein coal is the most common in Allegheny County.

²These are boys who take care of the trap doors.

To average the wages of all the men working in the mines will hardly give an adequate idea of their earnings. The wages for day labor are fixed at \$2.36 and \$2.56 per day. Counting 225 working days as the average for 1907 the earnings of a day laborer underground were from \$531.00 to \$576.00. It must be remembered, however, that less than 200 days' pay is all that he gets during ordinary years. The outside day laborer earns annually only about \$400.00. A pick miner can mine about three tons of coal a day. At the present scale of 90 cents he makes \$2.70 a day and \$607.50 a year.

The men who do the undercutting with machines are exceptionally skilled. Two men with one machine usually work together. They go from room to room and cut a space about six feet deep and four inches high at the bottom of a coal vein. These men make \$40, \$60, \$80 and sometimes even \$90 in two weeks. To do the last, however, they often work more than eight hours. The majority of the cutters make from three to four dollars per day. Some make as low as \$2.50. The annual income of the average undercutter would be from \$700 to \$800. In this he is about on a par with the skilled man of the building trades in the City of Pittsburgh. They both work eight hours per day, but the undercutter has a somewhat smaller rent to pay for he probably lives in a company house.

Behind the cutters come the loaders. They shoot the coal which has been undercut, and load it on three-ton cars to be taken out by mules, electricity or gravity to the tippie where it is dumped into boats or railroad cars. The loader works by the ton. He averages about \$2.25 per day and \$500 per year.

The highest earnings in the district are made in the great mine, Vesta No. 4, owned by Jones & Laughlin, the steel firm. It employs about 1,000 men and has an average output of almost 6,000 tons a day. In this mine, which has a thick vein and pays according to the mine run, two average men with an electric machine can undercut five rooms of forty tons each, or two hundred tons per day. At the price paid, .0565 per ton, these men together make \$11.30 a day, or each of them \$5.65. Some cutters in this mine draw regularly \$80 and \$90 every two weeks. An ordinary cutter, working every day that the Vesta No. 4 is in operation, can earn annually over \$1,500. Loaders in this mine average almost \$3.00 per day, which during the year would be \$900.00. Aside from the most

modern methods employed in this mine, the advantage of the Vesta No. 4 is the greater number of days which it operates. During 1907 it worked 306 days. Even if per hour the Vesta mine worker could make no more than the others, still his annual earnings would be greater by almost $33\frac{1}{3}$ per cent.

Very few of the miners who work by the piece supplement their regular earnings by working overtime. The union discourages it. The day laborers do most of the overtime work. All repairs, changes, etc., made in the mines, are done at night by day men working overtime. Some of these have made fifteen to eighteen shifts in two weeks instead of twelve. The union tried to do away with this extra work, but it was found impossible. Experienced men are needed to fix up the mines after the day's work is over. In the big mine, Vesta No. 4, a regular night force of repairmen is employed, thus doing away with overtime work.

It is difficult to compare the wages in union mines with those in the non-union, for they are not paid on the same basis. Connells-ville miners work ten hours; they have no check-weighman to tally their tonnage and they get no extra pay for "dead work." The rate for day laborers in these mines is \$2.35 per day. This is about twenty per cent less per hour than is paid to the union day laborer.

In each union mine there is a mine committee whose business it is to look after the interests of the union. The men report grievances to this committee and it takes them up with the superintendent. It also sees that none of the union rules or the rules of the signed agreement are violated.

While it is understood between the operators and the union that there shall be no discrimination as to the men to be employed in the mines, the practice of signing scales for all occupations and making deductions from the men's pay for check-weighman and union dues, brings practically all the men into the union, and thus they have a closed shop.

The wages of the check-weighman and the expenses of his office are collected through the pay office semi-monthly upon a statement of time made by the check-weighman. The amount so collected is deducted on a percentage basis from the earnings of all those actually engaged in mining coal. Deductions for union dues are also made through the pay office. The amount of such

deduction is stated by the mine committee subject to the instructions of the men. The agreement provides that when union dues are thus paid they shall follow deductions for check-weighman, accident and death benefit, rent and smithing.

At nearly every mine in Allegheny County there are company houses for the miners. The operators would not let the union interfere with these. The rents of the houses go up and down with the changes in the wage scales. They went up one dollar a month with the new scale in 1906. A four-room house with a lot up to one hundred feet rents for six to ten dollars per month. Large houses cost more in proportion. The rents of these houses are almost half what laborers pay in the City of Pittsburgh, and the companies as a rule keep their houses in good repair. There is not much dissatisfaction among the mine workers with these houses. On the contrary, the houses seem to be in great demand. Complaints are sometimes made that the company will not give a man a house unless he also buys at the company stores.

These stores are managed by two companies. The Federal Supply Company conducts those of the Pittsburgh Coal Company, and the Valley Supply Company those of the Consolidated River Coal Company. Unlike the company houses, these stores have been at times sources of bitter discontent. The usual charge is that those who do not deal with them are discriminated against, as in the matter of getting the houses. The union has several times appointed committees to make investigations, but nothing came of them. The prices charged at the stores are usually those generally prevailing in the community. Fully two-thirds of the company stores have competition, and this brings the prices down. In isolated communities where the company has a monopoly prices are higher. To trade on credit the men get checks with small amounts printed on them. Purchases are punched on these checks, and deducted from the wages. Some miners pay cash for all they buy. The credit checks are some times cashed at a discount. This practice, however, is no longer common, for the company will discharge the miner who discounts his credits.

The subject of accidents is becoming a bitter one at the conventions of District No. 5. Both every day risks and the enormous loss of life from explosions are subjects of complaint. Under ordinary circumstances in the Pittsburg District about fifteen per-

sons are injured during the year and three are killed for every thousand that are employed in and about the mines. From July, 1906 to July, 1907, there were 71 fatal accidents among the mine workers of Allegheny County. Three of the accidents were due to explosions of powder at the miners' homes. In the county there are not quite 20,000 mine workers employed. If we count the fatalities as 68, the percentage is 3.4 per thousand. This percentage is greater than that of any country in Europe, and about equal to the average for the United States. The years 1907 and 1908 have been marked by a number of horrible mine disasters in the bituminous field of Pennsylvania. In December, 1907, there were explosions of two mines in the Pittsburgh District and 274 men were killed. So complete was the work of these explosions that not a single miner escaped. This fact and the evidence at the coroner's inquest that the mines were unsafe before the explosions, lead the miners to believe that the slaughter might have been prevented. The government has established a testing laboratory at Pittsburgh, which is experimenting with mine dust and the like, in order to find means of preventing explosions. The officers of the union are trying to get legislation which will lessen the danger of such disasters in the future as well as prevent some of the ordinary accidents. The Pennsylvania Employers' Liability law of 1907 was urged by the miners throughout the state. As a result of it the operators are taking much greater precautions to prevent the occurrence of accidents. The amendments to the Bituminous Mining Law which are advocated by the officials of the union and which will be presented to the legislature this year, are along the following lines:

1. That all miners employed in gaseous mines be required to pass an examination, have two years' experience and hold a certificate.
2. That the company employ certificate fire bosses to charge and fire all shot in gaseous mines after all other men are out of the mine.
3. That it be compulsory to use safety lamps in mines having dangerous quantities of gas and where there is danger of an explosion.
4. That all mines that are dry or dusty be sprinkled daily.

5. That the ventilation be increased to 300 cubic feet for each miner.
6. That an extra fan be kept for use in case of emergency.
7. That openings be made to the surface from the inner workings of every mine.
8. That the use of electricity be discontinued in mines generating gas.
9. That all trappers be at least sixteen years of age, and trap doors abolished wherever possible.
10. Superintendents to hold managers' certificates.